

What Is Africa to Me? Knowledge Possession, Knowledge Production, and the Health of Our Bodies Politic in Africa and the Africa Diaspora

Abena P. A. Busia

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At home Death claims
Two streams from women's eyes
And many day-long dirges;
Gnashes, red eyes and sighs from men,
The wailing of drums and muskets
And a procession of the townsfolk
Impeded
Only if the coffin decides
To take one last look at the home.

But here I see
Three cars in procession.
The first holds three—
A driver chatting gaily with a mate,
And behind them, flowers on a bier.
The second holds five, and the third too.

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Abena P. A. Busia is an associate professor in the Department of English and Women's Studies at Rutgers University. Her works include *Theorizing Black Feminisms* (co-edited with Stanlie James) and *Beyond Survival* (co-edited with Kofi Anyidoho and Anne Adams). Her poems have been anthologized on three continents and her book *Testimonies of Exile* was published by Africa World Press in 1990. She also co-directs, with Tuzyline Jita Allan and Florence Howe of the Feminist Press, *Women Writing Africa*, a multivolume continentwide publishing project of cultural reconstruction.

A procession
 Efficiently arranged by the undertaker,
 From the brass fittings on the bier
 To the looks of sorrow on the mourners' faces.
 And Death is escorted
 Tearlessly but efficiently
 By
 Three cars in procession.

Jawa Apronti, "Funeral"

Funerals are important,
 away from home we cannot lay
 our dead to rest,
 for we alone have given them
 no fitting burial.

Self conscious of our absence,
 brooding over distances in western lands
 we must rehearse,
 the planned performance of our rites
 til we return.

And meanwhile through the years,
 our unburied dead eat with us,
 follow behind through bedroom doors

Abena P. A. Busia, "Exiles"

In 1976, in the middle of what was for us a second exile, my father's younger brother died. This death was shortly followed by the news of the death of his 112-year-old aunt, the only grandmother we had ever known. In accordance with custom and tradition, a few weeks later, and against the odds, the family in Wenchi, a town in the Brong-Ahafo region in the middle of Ghana, managed to send to Papa in Standlake, a small village in the countryside west of Oxford, the fragment of the burial cloth that was his aunt's and which he would have received on the day of the burial, had he been there. My father had by then lost his sight, but the strip of cloth was put in his hand, and he kept it in his bedside drawer until the day he too went home to his village. When it was given to him, I watched him fingering it over and over and over again, in complete silence. I left him sitting on his bed, fingering that strip in a lonely pensiveness, and was moved to write my poem "Exiles." Funerals *are* important, and that was the moment I learnt just how important they were. That poem became the first of my poems I ever read to my father (though there had been many others written earlier). It thus also became the poem which made my father aware

that, and express his consciousness of the fact that, his political decisions had affected us, his children, so very personally, in ways he had never realized or anticipated. That is the private face of death from the perspective of exile, and is only one of the generative threads or colors with which these meditations begin. There are many threads running through these remarks I share with you this evening—the question of rituals of mourning is one, the meaning of those practices for those of diasporas old and new is another.

That as communities of learning we are now strategically aware of the need for African studies to be at the center of diaspora studies and for diaspora studies to be integral to African studies is absolutely critical. But these days, we are increasingly aware of multiple diaspora, including what some people in short-hand call old diaspora and new diaspora. The old diaspora centered on the forced migrations of the transatlantic slave trade and the new worlds it created, and the new diaspora on much more recent immigrants, those post–World War II migrants who represent the continuing power differential between “the West and the Rest of Us,” in a long continuum of human exchange; we are the flotsam and jetsam of other traumatic moments: same story, different century.

The extent to which it is the same story I can perhaps bring out most clearly by asking you to imagine Ganvie, one of the villages built on water which, as the work of scholars such as Eliséé Soummoni has shown us, formed part of the intricate network of defense devised in resistance to the trade. If we wish to have a discussion about how groups respond to centuries of sustained terror, a trip I took last summer was a salutary reminder of a wealth of those strategies, from the walled cities of Gwellu, to the architecture of the Paga Piiu’s palace, to these villages in the network of lagoons in the Bight of Benin. Imagine on those waters not only the fishermen touted to us as pictureseque in poverty by a rapacious tourist industry, but also a traffic of long motorized barges loaded with empty black oil drums, piled high on top of one another headed for Lagos to collect contraband oil. And it hit me, for the first time, that slavery was a *trade*. That is to say, as someone in the humanities, I had always looked at the slave trade from the point of view of the moral issue of slavery. That single vision of the oil from Lagos being smuggled through that same ancient network of lagoons that a little over a century ago facilitated the illegal trade in human traffic impressed upon me more fully than any other words or images that slavery truly was a trade, a trade which, given the organization of the economies of the day, was as life sustaining for the participant communities as illegal oil is today. For the flesh that is black ivory substitute the liquid that is black gold: same story, different century; same business, different product.

I’m concerned also, as are all of us in this room, with the larger context in which we recognize that very often African knowledge is surreptitious knowledge as far as the Western world is concerned. The history of power and imperialism and colonialism has given raise to a world in which

it is not possible to be in African and diaspora studies and be unaware of the questions and problems posed by the seeming contradictions between Western cultural and economic imperialism and black/African cultural identities, but the reverse is not true. We have not reversed the power differentials between the “West and the Rest of Us,” and in the immediate centuries that shape the lives we live today, that struggle for power has been an unequal one at every level.

It would be satisfying if at this juncture I could follow these opening comments by offering a grand narrative of postcolonial discourse which would place us firmly in a coherent universe of explanations. It would be comforting to have a vision of Africa to go “back” to, to explain our new world agonies in terms of old world certainties. But if those worlds ever existed, they certainly are not there now. I offer, therefore, no grand narratives, only the exemplary moments of poetry. I am, if you like, a poet of the freeze frame, in close up. I offer a handful of memories, frozen in poetic time for contemplation, to see if we can understand them for the complexity of what they represent, in miniature.

I opened this talk with two poems. And the parallel between the situations of their opening lines was not accidental. Jawa Apronti’s poem is a poem spoken by a person clearly in exile; entitled “Funeral,” it begins with the words, “At *home* death.” My poem, entitled “Exile” begins with the words “*funerals* are important.” In Apronti’s poem the speaker is not actually in the process of mourning; what the poem does is point out a context, which is so evident to a Ghanaian, concerning modes of mourning and the rituals associated with it. He articulates those “absences in distant lands” to which I refer. What I am conscious of is not even simply the existence of different kinds of funerals so much as the absence of the expression of a particular kind of public solidarity in, and expression of, grief. That expression represented by the townsfolk of Apronti’s poem: we are removed from all of it. That is the thing that struck me about the question of rituals of mourning and therefore the impact of grief when you are in exile. Both poems interrogate the meaning of life, and thus the meaning of death—and in their very existence, the purpose of poetry. Poetry and ritual, in this case the poetry of mourning and the rituals associated with it, do bear witness, but what kind of witness is it that they bear?

My father, the Ghanaian sociologist K. A. Busia, opened his book *The Challenge of Africa* (1962), one of his two books on Africa in search of democracy, with an extended discussion of “culture,” beginning with a discussion of funeral practices because his research had shown him that “the study of rituals and beliefs connected with the dead became rewarding as a means of understanding their concepts of life and their interpretation of the universe around them.”

There is, everywhere, the heavy accent on family—the blood relatives, the group of kinsfolk held together by a common origin and a common oblig-

ation to its members, to those who are living and those who are dead. For the family is conceived as consisting of a large number of people, many of whom are dead, a few of whom are living, and countless numbers of whom are yet to be born Belief in the continuity of the family lies at the basis of obligation, of law and custom, of behavior. It guides and regulates individual conduct. The ancestors continue as members of the group. They watch over it. [However], the death of a member is the concern not only of the kingroup but of the whole village or [tribal] community. Normal activities are stopped; everyone joins in the mourning, in the wailing and drumming and dancing. The cost to the community in time and economic production may be heavy, but the community's values are not measured thus.

These values are expressed within the ceremonies, as an integral part of the rituals and the dirges. Death is a part of the cycle of creation, yet it is painful because it is separation, particularly to those closest to the deceased. This pain is thus both expressed and exorcized through the performance of the elaborate rituals of each part of the three- or four-part funeral rituals. We know the deceased must “go home” to join the ancestors to continue to watch over us, but it is hard to see them go. We are enjoined not to wail, but the wailing is an integral part of the ceremonies. These observations have most meaning in the context in which they are offered, in a vital recognition of different rituals of mourning. Both the physical and the metaphysical worlds are thrown into disarray when death occurs.

The poignancy of the sight of Father at his most alone, stroking his aunt's burial cloth, comes from a recognition that for him, his exile meant the absence of the performance of ritual, an absence of ritual which, for him, was a total disruption of what Carolyn Forché calls his “moral universe” (2000:45), in which ritual observation was a part of the moral framework of ontological order. Those rituals anchor the sense of identity and human community (he was the first-born son of the only sister, and considered the head of the family); his world had been rendered askew, and he could not play his part in setting it aright. In the end, Father never returned to do that. He died in exile, in August of 1978, and was given, under difficult circumstances, a state funeral in October 1978, forty days after his passing. His family, having waited through the years for him to return for the final funeral rites, held joint ceremonies for him, his aunt, and his younger brother the following spring. This is the context in which Apronti's poem must be heard. Apronti's poem, written and read in circumstances in which the meanings of funerals are so different, attempts to anchor a sense of the politics of cultural difference for survivors and other displaced, exiled peoples. My sense of the word *exile* is of course, by virtue of biography, political exile. However, I wish to stress that I would like to embrace all forms of involuntary displacement, whether for reasons of politics and war, or for those equally forceful, equally involuntary, but less readily demonstrable reasons—economic and social. And propitiation must be made to set all worlds aright.

That propitiation goes beyond the personal. On my trip last summer, one of the most significant stops on the route was Salaga, the site of the ancient market. In that place we met a woman, whose story is self-explanatory:

Ancestral Milk

i. White Calico

Beyond the market
on the outskirts of Salaga,
in what used to be wilderness,
you will find a solitary baobab tree,
wrapped in white calico
in a vegetable garden planted with corn.

Baobab trees are sacred
they grow large, live long
and are strong
strong enough to contain the spirits of ancestors
and the unquiet dead.
White calico rings this ancient tree of accidental sanctity
where the dead en route were dumped.
Not buried, but deposited as refuse
beside the still living abandoned dying,
chained by the neck to the trunk.
Through the centuries bark has encrusted the iron staples
like scabs over sores
obscuring the cause of the infection with a scaly patina
gnarled by time and circumstance and silent sorrow.

ii. White Beads

A priestess, the white beads of office on her neck and wrists
tends to the crop to keep the garden tidy.
Interrupted, she pauses to explain
the functions of her office:
Every Friday and Every Monday, year after year
she nourishes spirits with milk,
to keep them safe
under this tree,
performing her lonely office
of tending the unmarked graves
of the abandoned dead of unknown family
feeding fresh milk to the spirits of captives
who died walking to or marching from
this market of slaves.
Every Friday and every Monday
Through the centuries,

while Muslims raided the peoples to the north
and sold them to the Christians in the south
her family of traditional priests have fed the spirits of the dead.
And continue to do so long after the trade in flesh has stopped
and Muslims and Christians trade peacefully
in whatever new commodity needs exchanging in their age-
gold, gunpowder, kola nuts,
leather goods, fabrics, second hand car parts.

What is the depth of anguish, and what the faith
that commits mother, sister, daughter niece
week in week out, through the centuries,
to perform this lonely office
unwitnessed, unsupported, unacknowledged.

iii. White Milk

Once this was wilderness, and foreboding forest
where vultures preyed on the bones of those
who would not be missed, or could never be found.
But these women found you, and knew someone would miss you.

Too late to tend to your bodies,
year after year they nourish your spirits with milk,
to keep you safe under this tree.
For fed spirits can be satiated and made happy,
can be made to dance under the protection of these branches.

So here, in a place where named ancestors
drink greedily the clear spirits poured
by those of their own blood,
you unnamed lost spirits
crave cow's milk for food
in your limbo of time.

So come, eat, you who marched the trail of tears and died here;
you the rebellious and you the weak,
come, eat, you whose spirits were broken by the flesh markets and the forts;
you the heroic and you the conspirators,
come, eat you who tried to just make a way to live, and faltered.

You of unnameable ancestors, and unknown descendants, come
Here, after all, you are safe.
Here every Friday and every Monday
one women at a time, through the centuries, has prayed for you
has fed you milk under a baobab tree scarred by your iron
and swathed in calico to greet you through the centuries
unwitnessed, unacknowledged, unmemorialized.

In all the disruptions of history, there are multiple groups of people left trying to restore a sense of order, those for whom here and there, then and now, are not so easily divided. What persists is the need to bear witness.

In her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (2000), Carolyn Forché says of the poets in her anthology that they are those for whom:

the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract, . . . those for whom the normative promises of the nation-state have failed. They have not been afforded the legal or physical protections that the modern state is supposed to lend its citizens. Nor have they been able to enjoy the solidarity that the concept of the nation is supposed to provide.

She is speaking, in this case, of those who had suffered internal displacements and the brutalities of the state—often including imprisonment, torture, and death—enacted against its own citizens who did not manage to get away. Yet that statement can also be said to be true of those of us who did manage to make it out, and who never suffered such brutalities; those who nonetheless remain migrants of tragedy rather than (necessarily) migrants of adversity.

Forché goes on to point out that

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between “personal” and “political” poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.

She therefore proposes a third term that can, as she puts it, “describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal.” She calls this space the “social,” for “the social is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice.”

The poems I offer are precisely those that have arisen out of those junctures, moments in which poetry offers itself up, in the name of justice,

to grapple with a disordered world in the context of saving rituals. But first, another anecdote.

A few years ago I was invited to the Rochester institute of Technology to conduct a faculty development workshop. So whilst there, I took the opportunity of visiting the Eastman Kodak Museum. I was fortunate that it was the year of the centenary of the Brownie, and amongst the many events celebrating that little camera, which was the first camera of almost everyone I know, was a glorious exhibit of every Brownie ever made, displayed in chronological order. We could all mark our age group by the camera we first knew. What was very striking was that if you looked at only the first and the last in the series, the two cameras had nothing in common. Yet when they were seen on display, with the dozens of intervening cameras also displayed, it was clear that the differences between each that had led to such a large change overall were only small and incremental, at times barely perceptible, and the links between the cameras at their different stages were irrefutable.

It might be fruitful to think of that vexed word *tradition* in the same manner. With each manifestation of a “traditional” ceremony, what is produced is its own variant, dependent on its own time, space, and ritual acts and immediate needs. Nothing remains static; the way we mourn and perform our rituals for the dead in New Jersey is not the way we do it in Wenchi. This is the health of ritual. However, in form and performance, rituals still carry the echo of that remembered form which each performance both recalls and gives the lie to. So instead of sitting in open spaces outside the family home, we hire church halls and do the things that need to be done, improvising from necessity to create something new that we dress in the language of tradition, sometimes amazing and bemusing our neighbors because of the sudden influx of people and color, all the public ceremony and noise that Ghanaian funerals generate, which seem incomprehensible unless you understand the culture of mourning. The danger is the extent to which we are all capable of amnesia, forgetting the cameras in between.

As Isidore Okpewho (1979, 1990, 1992) and others have pointed out, much of African oral performance poetry occupies this space of the social, sometimes as resistance, and sometimes as celebration. This is particularly true of dirges and lamentations. In many African societies—and I speak here particularly of Akan society—death, which signifies a transition from this world into that of the ancestors, is a time of collective mourning and celebration. Whole communities mourn because death curtails people’s contributions to individual and community lives. However, the belief that existence continues in the spiritual world of the ancestors, from where the spirits can and do commune with the living, enables communities to celebrate death. In funeral and burial ceremonies, meant to usher the deceased into their next abode, much of the expression of grief is chan-

neled through the aesthetically controlled mode of songs, chants, and recitatives, performed at different and sometimes dramatic points of the ceremony, such as the moment the wake begins. Ceremonies also play an important role of historical record-keeping, since they function as texts that place the dead person's life in social and historical perspective. In what follows, the need is to remember that sameness in difference, that shift with every repetition that makes each individualized act sacred in itself, yet comprehensible in a larger context.

Ghanaian funeral rituals include, particularly for public occasions, many kinds of eulogizing acts, and here I need to speak of one of the first of them as a force that inspired me to write one of my poems into that space of the social where poems are produced for performance. We have become accustomed to the convention that obituaries are what we read in the newspapers and include in the burial service: a brief encapsulation of the major events of the deceased's life by which we should remember the person. But this is not the actual meaning of the word. The word simply means a report of a death, and Ghanaian funeral announcements are just that, but in an elaborate and stylized way.

Our obituary notices are large public announcements, notices on A3 paper, in a recognizable format. At the very top will be the leading members of the deceased person's lineage on both sides of the family, and the announcement that such and such personages, of such and such a family, regret to announce the calling home of their beloved such and such. And it will be followed by a photograph, the name and the dates of the deceased, the dates of the wake ceremonies, the burial, funeral, and memorial services, and then a list of the other members of the lineages (aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, children and in-laws, grandchildren, nephews and nieces) and the chief mourners—such people as are significant to the life and ceremonies though they may not necessarily be blood relations. These obituaries are just that, announcements of a death which then become not a recital of the achievements of the life (that is done at another place and time), but rather an archaeology of family and community, locating the deceased person in his or her distinct lineages and communal associations.

Now one of the things that impelled me to write the poem "And What Remains" for the funeral of General A. A. Afrifa was a sharp moment of poignancy and pathos on reading his particular funeral announcement in January 2002. General Afrifa, best known for being one of the people who spearheaded the coup against Nkrumah (thus making it possible for us to return home after our first exile), had later become chairman of the three-man Presidential Commission before the selection of Edward Akufo-Addo as civilian president of the Second Republic, of which my father was the prime minister. After the coup which overthrew the Second Republic (and

sent us into our second exile), Afrifa was one of the principal agitators for the return of the Third Republic. He never lived to see it, for he was one of the people rounded up in the so-called Glorious Revolution of Jerry Rawlings (in his first dispensation, as head of state, as Flight Lieutenant Rawlings) in June 1979, and along with six other officers—two others also former military heads of state—summarily executed on June 29, 1979. The Rawlings regimes (for he had a second dispensation as perhaps the most reluctant democrat of our rulers) never returned those bodies for burial. It was not until the election of 2000, which brought in the current administration under President John Agyekum Kuffuor, that the bodies were exhumed, identified, and returned to their families for interment with the proper rituals. After all I have said, it should be clear how cruelly indecent, what anathema, this defiance of custom had been on the part of the Rawlings administrations. It became a festering example of how, even within our states, some bodies are not legitimate, even in death. Unfortunately, the history of our continent is littered with the bodies of the unburied, unquiet dead. By comparison, the history of Ghana seems a peaceful one. I referred to Rawlings as a reluctant democrat to underscore the truth and the irony that under him we established our Fourth Republic, which has so far seen four relatively peaceful elections, something which none of the first three managed. Thus the poems I am about to share with you must be seen in the context, if you like, of the interregnum that contained our Second and Third Republics and the military regimes that surrounded and interrupted them, in an otherwise comparatively successful attempt to create and secure a legitimate state.

We all knew Afrifa's history, and he remains certainly one of the most controversial leaders, whether seen as a military man or a civilian. Yet his funeral announcement followed the correct conventional format; it gave the dates of his birth and death, followed by the dates of the funeral services, with absolutely no comment whatsoever about the almost twenty-three years in between. What struck me with full force was the ordinariness of what the mourners had done; there was no deviation from the conventional format. It was that simple act that made me realize, with full force, that that is what they had been waiting for two and half decades to do—waiting to bury their dead, simply waiting to perform the last rites for their loved one. It was that lack of comment about the passage of time that made the recognition of its duration so poignant.

The other thing that was self-evident, without comment, after twenty-three years, was the shift in generation of the names of the people making the announcement. They and the chief mourners were no longer principally people of his parents' generation; the principal mourners were now principally the names of his peers, and it was that which also moved me to write the poem for one of those figures, frozen in time, his widow.

And What Remains

*for Christie Afrifa,
On the Occasion, After Twenty-Three Years,
of the Final Funeral Rites for Her Late Husband*

and what remains?

a woman over twenty years his widow, after barely ten years his bride;
a life time keeping wake, our dead hero's spirit, restless, by her side.

and what remains?

for some of us, the magic heroes of our youth never die;
sometimes they grow up into other selves we do not understand,
sometimes they die too young to change,
living in our hearts forever grand,

sometimes, something in between

as, like his orphaned children, we must learn
that to be the hero of one story is to be prepared
to be the villain of another, told by your adversary:
this man was prepared.

The magic almost worked;
the bullets couldn't make him die, at least, not easy, and not soon:
such contradictions of torment and triumph
of a life well meant.

and what remains?

to lay to final rest the bones of a man, of soaring restless fervour,
and inextinguishable valour.

© Abena P. A. Busia, Accra, January 2002

That poem commemorates one of many efforts by the state to bring health unto itself through the ritual forms the society recognizes as necessary, a desire for moral health, writ large on the national canvas. Yet it also acknowledges the unspoken, the things that cannot be said over which a narrative of wholeness is attempted—just as the actions of the priestess rituals of remembrance cannot obliterate the past, they can only serve as recompense for that past in communities that accept such ceremonies as recompense. All silences need their witness.

Four years earlier, in the summer of 1998, for the twentieth anniversary of Father's passing at which we unveiled his memorial tombstone, I had written a poem entitled "Of Memory and Loss" in which, once again, I struggled to find the words to speak for the collective group I was representing—in this case my brothers and sisters—and to memorialize our collective history and articulate in poetry the sentiments we all wanted

expressed. The point I would like to stress here is that this poem, though intensely personal to us, enters the space of the social as a public text in a political context.

It is the custom in Ghana for the children to unveil the tombstones of their parents on the first anniversary of the death. Thus a delay of twenty years required some explanation, which could not be made without reference to the time of his dying, and the location of his final resting place in his home in Wenchi. The land is the property of his matriline, bounded on the northeast border by the Wenchi-Akrobi road, the road to his father's home. There are three trees that were important to Father growing up on that property. The first, at the southeast entrance, is the Nyamedua, the sacred tree of the gods, after which the house is named. The second, on the northwest boundary, is a now aging but once spectacular fan-palm, which when we were young we knew as the tree that ended Nana Abrewa's peanut farm, that great-aunt I spoke of earlier. And the third is to the southwest, on Onyina overlooking the Akrobi road. It was in the shade of this last silk-cotton tree that father, as he often told us, held conversations with his mother and aunt and made all the major decisions of his life, and it was in the shade of this tree that he wished to be buried.

For this reason, when he passed away in Oxford twenty-five years ago, his brothers and sisters determined to bury him there. Our aunts and uncles imagined a straight line between the Nyamedua and the fan-palm, and where that intersected with the line from the silk-cotton to the Akrobi road they dug his grave. In those terrible three weeks—whilst in Accra the then military rulers wrestled, on the one hand, with a family intransigent over the question of granting a state funeral to a man on whose head those self-same rulers had placed a bounty, and on the other, with the executive of his Progress Party determined to bury their founding father in the chiefly manner his life deserved, and while we waited in Oxford for resolutions to these confusions—they quietly cleared the site in Wenchi, dug the grave, and lined it with cement in preparation for the final ceremonies for the familial dead, over which they knew only they had command.

On the day of the burial, after the massed choirs of the Methodist churches from around the country were assembled and singing, and the diplomatic corps were seated, we were sent for. We had been asked to wait until everything was ready in the church, and five minutes before the start of the service we were sent for. As Mama was looking around to check that we were all together, present and ready, we heard the sound of police sirens and turned to see dispatch riders of the military police racing through the gates to halt our progress. They handed our mother a letter whose peremptory instructions have been seared on our memories ever since: "Madam, it has come to our attention that you intend to bury the remains of the late Kofi Busia in the grounds of confiscated property. Under no circumstances is this to be allowed to happen. You are obliged to comply."

In moments of pain and outrage, the most arbitrary things strike our

minds. I noticed then that even in death, at the end of a state funeral, they couldn't give our father the respect of a title. Forget "The Right Honourable" to which he had been elected by the overwhelming majority of the people of this country, or even the "Dr." he had earned at such hard cost. He was not even accorded the simple dignity of the "Mr." accorded every mature man and father, let alone one who had helped found a nation. And I noticed above all the cruelty, the lack of simple human compassion in handing a widow a letter written in such a tone, at such a time. They had had weeks to raise the objection. And now, instead of sending someone to explain, or request, someone simply to speak to our mother, they chose to send a messenger with such an outrageous letter, in such a manner, at such a time.

Mother was faced with a choice—to begin a dispute with a functionary, delay the funeral, and turn this most sacred of moments into the occasion of a fiasco and a brawl—or to comply. With characteristic dignity and resolution, after she had calmed the rage of the children, she marshaled some equally appalled bystanders to dig another grave. Some of these men, it must be said to their credit, were also policemen and soldiers who, like their fellows who had helped dig the original grave, had not forgotten simple grace. Mother asked them to have the new place, a piece of garden between the old and the new homes, ready by the time the service was over. This done, we left for the service. Thus the rest of the family was surprised when on returning from the church, we led the pallbearers to a new location.

For twenty years the regional police, who made our home their headquarters, changed guard in front of Papa's grave. For twenty years we, his children, had been determined that we would not raise his tombstone until we could raise it where he had wished to be buried. For twenty years we fought the battle for the restoration of those properties, in order that we might finally lay our father's body to rest. This is a battle we did not win. Representations to successive governments, requests to the Commissioner for Human Rights and Administrative Justice, motions in Parliament, letters and interviews to the press—all had been to no avail. And twenty years had passed. That disruption of the moral universe remained for his siblings, and it remained, as for the families of the executed soldiers, not a private sorrow but a public reproach. Our father, the eldest of thirteen, has only one remaining brother left alive. On the twentieth anniversary, our mother, nearing her eightieth year, and our last paternal uncle made an appeal to us; we had to take counsel. They impressed upon us that for them, this unerected monument represented an unfinished duty of love, and having exceeded their three-score years and ten, they could not be assured of any more decades left. They could not leave this world with our father's tomb still unfinished; what adequate words of explanation could they give? We decided to end our twenty-year silent protest and erected, that year, a memorial where he lay. Still pained by the circumstances, we are assured, however, of two things; first, that for the sake of our mother, our

father's remaining brother, and three sisters, we made the kindest decision; and second, that despite these circumstances, we had much to be grateful for. For in the light of the subsequent history of Ghana, the executions of former heads of state, the murders of high court judges, and the acts of violence against ordinary citizens for which we also have had our own Truth Commissions, propitiation must yet be made to set all worlds aright for those to come. We at least do know how and why our father died, and above all, where, indeed, he is buried. Not all the children of people whose parents have played their role in the making of Ghana have been so fortunate. Much has changed, at least on the level of public acts of recompense. The generals have been buried, and though the house in whose shade father wished to be buried has not been restored to us, the one he built in Accra for our mother, who is from Accra, has.

Of Memory and Loss

Beneath God's tree we have kept vigil for two decades:
Injustice leaves turmoil in its wake,
And we still struggle against its tides.

We grow battle weary.

We tell ourselves the dead miss their tombstones
Like sleepers miss the pillows on their beds.
This is not true.

We miss the monuments
As the foundations of our memories crack with time,
And we cling to different fragments of truth.

What is the meaning of death in the face of time?

What lingers always is the memory of loss:
Memorials are the foundations we prepare
To defy the tricks of time.

Elegies are lullabies to rock the already sleeping dead,
Subterfuges for the living; like parents clinging to a child
And singing, long after the infant has been lulled to sleep.

What is the meaning of time in the face of death?

I cling to an anger that will not yield to this truth -
I miss the sound of your laughter, and the touch of your hand.
It is that simple.

Slowly, like falling silk cotton in the wind,
We have found the resolution of a truce:

This should have been a happy song,
 But I can't sing in tune,
 And I can't sing through tears.

This effort is as hard as the granite we have etched,
 Lovingly but war worn, to fulfill our half-kept promise.
 We ask your forgiveness.

Slowly, like falling silk cotton in the winds of time,
 We have come to revelations:
 Beneath God's tree we have kept vigil for two decades:
 And the sleep of the Just makes no earthly sound,
 So your spirit is quiet:

Because the meaning of death, and the meaning of time,
 like the meaning of life, is God's Love.

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I marshaled these incidents together out of a faith that poetry anchors us in our sense of being; and that within that poetry, the rituals of mourning in both speech acts and performance, whether formal or informal, demonstrate what is most enduring in us as individuals, and as communities.

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